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Congregation Agudas Achim
Rosh Hashanah Day 2 5778
“Finding Strengths in Uncertain Times”

Have you ever felt like your life was about to irreversibly change? And though you're hopeful that you'll be able to see the glass as half full once this change comes, the only thing that you are 100% certain about is that you have no idea what your life is going to look like in a very brief period of time, that there is not much you can do about it, and there will be no option to go back to how things were before?

Now, the irony, of course, is that we never actually know what our future is going to be like. When things seem dark, we'll never actually know if this cosmological shift in our reality actually was what allowed x amazing thing to happen - however far down the road. Or, conversely, if at precisely y moment, our lives crumbled in irreparable ways.

On Rosh Hashanah, our liturgy repeatedly says that today is the birthday of the world. While we can understand this literally, we can also understand it figuratively. On Rosh Hashanah, through the power of reflection, of heshbon hanefesh, of soul searching, of necessary and perhaps challenging conversations, we actively create our world for the next year. Like on any day with any decisions we make, we do not know exactly what type of world we are creating. And, for some of us, this may be quite challenging. So how can we surrender to the great unknowns in our lives with as little anxiety as possible?

Earlier this morning, we read from the Torah that God said to Abraham: “Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.” None of our ancient commentaries that I consulted envision Abraham thinking what I imagine must have been going through his head as I read this text, this year, at this time: “What have I gotten myself into? There must have been a time when I could have said “No.” This whole covenant thing sounded like a good idea at the beginning, but now I'm pretty sure that I've made a horrible mistake and I'm not sure how to undo it.”

Perhaps this particular encounter with God was not such an eye-opener for Abraham. Perhaps he realized from previous conversations with God that his life would never be the same. Or maybe, like so many of us who have taken on long-term projects or goals with multiple milestones we find ourselves thinking, “Ah! **Now** I've truly expanded in new ways.” And “This is as great as it will be,” or “This was an interesting experience, and I think I'm done now, thank you” – only to be proven wrong and find ourselves expanding in even new ways before much time at all has passed. In this particular encounter with God, perhaps Abraham has a newfound realization, one of many, of exactly how much his life is about to change due to this relationship he has entered into.

When we have these moments of realizing the need for increased expansiveness in our own lives, how do we respond? We often think of Abraham as responding “Hineini,”

“Here I am,” with a sense of admiration for all that he is willing to do with his eyes wide open. But if one looks closely at the text, one sees that this was his response right before he gets the instructions to take his son and offer him as a sacrifice and then again right before he is actually about to sacrifice his son. In other words, the first time, Abraham makes a commitment without necessarily realizing what the ramifications of his willingness to jump into the unknown will be, and the second time it is perhaps with the hope that he will be unasked to do this thing that he unwittingly agreed to do in the first place.

One can easily understand this story as the rabbis traditionally have – that Abraham’s response of “Hineni” was one of faith. That it was precisely because he believed in God that he responded as he did, and that one of the key teachings of this story is that when God, or the Universe, or Humanity calls on us, we should answer without hesitation regardless of whether or not we know exactly what will come to us from our response. There is a unique sense of beauty in this type of faith. But, for me at least, it also feels very distant. Sure, I have taken leaps of faith, but I don’t know if I’d categorize them as being mindful ones. To some extent, I think I’d define them as taking leaps of faith from a mindset of ignorance being blissful. To think through the possible ramifications too much or too deeply would prevent any real course of action being taken. I think it is possible to also understand Abraham as having responded to God’s call from this particular frame of mind, and for him to continue to be an example of faith – perhaps just not the type of faith the rabbis originally envisioned.

And with the many challenges that Mother Nature has presented us this fall, both predicted and unforeseen, one can understand in a very tangible way how trying to ascertain every possible outcome of every decision is both comforting and paralyzing at the same time. Deciding to ride out a storm or evacuate and all that goes with either option: finding supplies, storing supplies if unused, unconsidered outcomes. And the example that came up for so many of our friends and family in Florida: leaving because it was the responsible thing to do, only to end up even more directly in the storm’s path because it suddenly shifted. Or those who left New Orleans after Katrina, starting life anew in Houston and now finding themselves starting over once again. The best made plans often go awry. This lack of power and certainty can be overwhelming as several flood victims reflected in the days following the storms.

When dealing with decisions or unpredicted realities, it is easy to focus on the fears, on the obstacles. If we close our eyes and picture an obstacle, it is likely to be something that is large, blocks our way, is insurmountable. Pesach Stadlin, a modern Jewish educator, musician and author, reflects on Rebbe Nachman’s Likutey Moharan 1:66 in his book Sustainable Bliss – saying, “The greater the goal, often, the greater the obstacle. If you want to do something awesome and huge, there will often be obstacles along the way. You could picture the obstacles like a dam. Obstacles can cause our desires to well up and gain strength as they push upon the impediment. Every action is rooted in a desire. Once your desire is strong enough, the dam resolves and comports, and the energy, your desire, surges...the greater the goal, the greater the momentum needed. Therefore, the greater the obstacles....[Sometimes] when an obstacle shows up and you can recognize it

as a gift instead of getting angry and frustrated, we can say, “Hey, you’re here to propel me. Thank you...let’s go.” On the other hand, and I think this is equally important, Stadlin is cautious to point out that there are many times we are able to accomplish great things without obstacles, and to be careful not to glorify the obstacles or see them as essential to meeting our goals. Rather, his point in studying Rebbe Nachman’s teachings, is to help us reframe how we may see that which initially blocks our path, whether this be the path towards *doing* what we hope to accomplish, or the path of *vision* in seeing the many possibilities that may be waiting for us on the other side.

Reframing a boulder or a dam or a looming dark cloud is challenging. I wish I could know what was going through Abraham’s head as a person, as a parent, as a spouse, when God spoke to him and told him to take Isaac to Mount Moriah as a sacrifice. In these challenging moments, sometimes additional difficulties arise because we try to act in ways we “think” we should, calling upon strengths that “successful” people possess – however we have come to define these terms for ourselves. As many of you have hopefully seen throughout the month of Elul, Rabbi Blumofe and I have been sharing reflections and suggestions on a particular set of strengths as defined by the Via Institute, inspired by our work with Rabbis Without Borders. The idea behind these strengths is that each person possesses all of them, and that some are naturally going to come more easily and readily to each of us than others. Rather than harping on those with which we struggle, perhaps our lives would be more enriched, strengthened, positive, if we directed our energies towards those which we already had natural inclinations. To think about it another way, an Olympic coach wouldn’t have his star sprinter focus on improving her marathon time, he would have her hone her craft of running quickly for short distances.

When we are faced with uncertainty, with challenges, how can our unique set of strengths help propel us over whatever obstacles (internal or external) we may be facing?

Some of Abraham’s strengths as inferred from today’s Torah reading might include: Self-regulation (Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one’s emotions). Perseverance (Finishing what one starts; persevering in a course of action in spite of obstacles). Spirituality (Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort). And Bravery (Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain).

Based on the experience of the Akeidah, I would not surmise that Abraham’s strengths included: Social Intelligence (Being aware of the motives/feelings of others and oneself). Kindness (Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them). Or Love (Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing & caring are reciprocated; being close to people).

Of course, all of these are open to interpretation, but, based on this particular understanding of Abraham’s strengths, when faced with challenges or difficult situations, he would be best suited to engage in ways where self-regulation, perseverance, spirituality and bravery were utilized. This could mean being the one to have difficult

conversations with others involved not only because of his strength of bravery, but also because these types of conversations often require perseverance and a certain amount of self-regulation. For example, these strengths are demonstrated by Abraham a few chapters earlier in the Torah when he negotiates with God about saving the people of Sodom and Gemorah. This is not to say that someone whose strengths were in fact kindness, love and social intelligence could not also have this difficult conversation with God, only that it would be framed differently both because of that person's perception of their relationship with God and because of their motivating factors.

In essence, we are all capable of overcoming challenging situations, and the tools we will use to assist us are going to differ from person to person. If we are able to see the tools and strengths we possess as malleable enough to help us in most situations, then we can truly begin to find ways of saying "Hineni" even when we think it will lead to life-altering experiences for which we are not certain we are ready. For whether we take a leap with blinders on or not, either way, we do not know how things will turn out, what type of world we will be creating for ourselves and others. By having faith in ourselves and our strengths that we will be able to navigate the territories in which we find ourselves, both familiar and not, and feeling that these strengths are enough, that we have enough and are enough, that is how we can find moments of peace with all of the great unknowns in our lives.

And when our faith waivers a bit, who do we know that can remind us of our core, internal strengths? How can we use our unique talents to help those we care about, while also honoring who they are and how they might approach a particular situation? Though we each have the ability to overcome, we also know that we are strengthened by teaming up with others.

When faced with the expansiveness of this day of creation, of truly processing what it means that all of this reflecting and introspection is done with the intention of continuing the cycle of creation of the world, one might not quite know where to start. Choosing not to reflect doesn't mean that one won't be engaged in creating a new year, it simply determines a different type of year that one will create. While on a macro level we remember today the cosmological creation that took place according to our tradition 5778 years ago, on a micro level, we are in the process of making decisions and taking actions to create our own personal world for the next year.

Here are a few more reflections to draw upon in this reflecting and creating process:

- 1) When do I feel most alive? What experiences nourish my soul that I don't do enough of? How can I make more time for that, even in incremental ways, in the new year?
- 2) With whom do I feel most myself? How can I cultivate that relationship?
- 3) What voice has been calling out to me that I've been ignoring rather than responding to with "Hineni"? What has been stopping me? How can I respond in some way this year?
- 4) What in my life do I notice is in need of repair? What talents and skills can I bring to this process?

The work of heshbon hanefesh, of personal reflection, is not easy, AND it is truly a gift. I'd like to conclude with a reflection inspired by the words of Pixie Lighthorse from her book "Prayers of Honoring" and a piece entitled "Surrender."

"Thank you for this reflective and contemplative day. Thank you for contrast, so that we can be clear of where we are.

Show us how to give in and not give up. Remind us that there is a time to make decisions and there is a very much a time to sit with strong feelings and patiently await the decision making time. Teach us to clean out old ideas, old expectations, old patterns, old triggers, and old bad habits, which harm us and linger in our bodies.

Be a reminder to us that the skin we shed today will feed the soil, and that the shell that protects us can crack and crumble, and nourish the Earth.

Empty us out, and fill us back up with what has always been ours and decidedly of You. Allow us to revel in the beauty that surrender brings." (Excerpts from Honoring Surrender, p. 45).

May this new year be one of opening ourselves up to possibilities, even those whose outcomes we cannot possibly fathom. May we be able to surrender our expectations and anxieties to worlds not yet created. May we have faith in ourselves, our inner strengths, and the strengths of those around us to support us and sustain us for whatever awaits us in 5778. Shana tova u'metuka.